

# City to let callers view response to complaints

By Donovan Slack, Globe Staff | August 1, 2006

There are certain things you don't want lost: an airline reservation, an expensive package, or a complaint to City Hall. So Boston is now planning to take a cue from airlines and companies such as FedEx. Soon, when you call the city to gripe about a pothole or about garbage that did not get picked up, you will receive a tracking number.

By the end of the year, residents who call the mayor's 24-hour hotline will be able to learn what has become of their complaints, which will be assigned numbers and logged in a central database so residents can check the status of their complaints and watch as they traverse the city's bureaucracy.

It is part of what officials say is a sweeping upgrade in the way the city manages services and measures its performance in providing them. In the upgrade, Boston is implementing a computer-based management program, Boston About Results, which will track performance in each city department. Data on issues from potholes to trash collection and Treasury bond performance will be continuously fed into computers.

The data will be crunched into scorecards noting progress -- or lack thereof -- and department heads will be called before the mayor each month to explain themselves. The Transportation Department will be judged on criteria such as the number of abandoned cars it tows each month. The Parks Department will have to answer for the number of trees it has pruned. Public Works could be judged on the number of maintenance requests it completes on schedule.

``They'll know their report, and they'll have to answer to us why they haven't followed through," Mayor Thomas M. Menino said. ``The city's changing, and my administration has to change, too."

Such management tools have recently gained popularity across the country and are now used in cities including Baltimore, San Francisco, and St. Louis, where tracking programs have been installed to grade performance.

Many have reported big results, saying that a wide range of problems has been brought under control.

Atlanta has reported a dramatic decrease in missed trash pickups since it began a program last year, and officials in Baltimore, a pioneer in such programs, said its CitiStat program is responsible for several million dollars in overtime savings and reduced employee absenteeism.

Somerville instituted a variation called SomerStat, which officials said has helped decrease police overtime costs and increase participation in city recreation programs.

Boston officials started rolling out their program last month, as city managers and employees started training. Department heads and Cabinet members will meet with administration officials in coming weeks to determine the criteria for evaluation. Beginning in September, department heads will be called before the mayor and his top aides for the first of the monthly meetings with scorecards.

One hoped-for benefit of the complaint tracking system, officials said, is to cut down on the number of steps required to get complaints and requests into the hands of workers who can do something about them. Currently, calls are logged by an operator who then sends e-mail notifications to the appropriate city departments, sometimes not until the next day. Then, more

time can go by as the complaints are processed by individual departments: entered on computers, converted to paper work orders, and eventually sent to workers in the field.

With the new system, officials said, complaints and requests would be immediately entered in a central database, making them accessible right away. Some workers, such as building inspectors, may carry handheld computers that can receive orders in the field.

“A lot of people have called and called and called over the years,” Menino said.

It may be the latest in municipal management, but some said the new program harkens back to the old ward system of politics, when ward bosses delivered constituents' votes for politicians and delivered services to constituents in return.

“In a very interesting way, this gets us back to what the ward bosses understood, which is that government has to produce results that people can see,” said David Luberoff, executive director of Harvard University's Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, which has issued a research paper about Baltimore's CitiStat and helped implement SomerStat in Somerville. “This combines the ward boss's focus on providing services with doing that proficiently and equitably.”

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